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THE UNITED STATES AND THE WAR

BY

GILBERT MURRAY.

Reprinted from the *Westminster Gazette*.

LONDON:
W. SPEAIGHT & SONS.
1916.

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THE UNITED STATES AND THE WAR.

I.

IT is dangerous to comment too freely on the psychology of foreign nations. I knew a man who held the opinion that Americans cared for only three things in the world—comfort, money, and safety—objects which notoriously inspire aversion in the normal Briton. And he explained this view at some length to two young Americans, one of whom had been working fourteen hours a day at the relief of distress in Belgium, while the other, with a sad disregard for truth and the feelings of his parents, had passed himself off as a Canadian in order to fight in the British Army.

I know another man, an American man of letters, who went off at his own expense at the time of the German advance in Poland to help the Polish refugees. He worked for months on end among people starving and dying of typhus,

often going without food himself and entirely abstaining from some of the most ordinary comforts of life. When I last met him he had seen a thousand people dead around him at one time. He was then on his way back to continue his work, and I felt some nervousness on hearing he was to pass through England. I have an inward feeling that someone at this moment is explaining to him that Americans ask no questions about the war except how much money they can make out of it, and the one thing you can be sure of about a Yank is that he will be too proud to fight.

This particular man will very likely not retaliate. He will smile sadly and search his conscience, and reflect sympathetically that people who are suffering cannot help being irritable. But some millions of his fellow-countrymen will answer for him, and they have rather a pretty wit when they set about answering. A placard over a certain large cinema show in New York once put the point neatly: ENGLISHMEN! YOUR KING AND COUNTRY WANT YOU. WE DON'T.

The beauty of that statement is that it finishes the matter and leaves nothing to argue about. But if you are unwise enough to wish to argue, you will find ample material. Think

of all the things, to begin with, that are said against England by Englishmen. Remember all the things that your most Radical friends have said in the past against the Tories and Imperialists, and add it to all that the Tories used to say about Lloyd George; double it by all that the U.D.C. on the one hand and Mr. Maxse and the *Morning Post* on the other are saying about everyone who does not worship in their own particular tabernacles; sum them all together, and put in front of them the words: "Honest Englishmen themselves confess——!" The effect will be quite surprising. It would be no wonder if the simple-minded American should feel some prejudice against a nation whose leaders are all in the pay of Germany and whose working-classes spend their lives in a constant debauch; a nation which makes up for its inefficiency in the field by riotous levity at home, by ferocious persecution of conscience and free speech, and by the extreme bloodthirstiness of its ultimate intentions towards the enemy. The wonder is that he feels it so little; that some sane instinct generally helps him to know the grosser kind of lie when he sees it, and some profound consciousness of ultimate brotherhood between the two great English-speaking peoples is so much

stronger than all the recurrent incidents of superficial friction.

The main cause of friction is, without doubt, that in the greatest crisis of our history we expected more from America than she was disposed to give. We felt to her a little as the Danes felt towards us in 1864, as the French felt towards us in 1870. When Belgium was invaded, when the *Lusitania* was sunk, the average Englishman did, without doubt, look expectantly towards America, and America did not respond to our expectations. Were those expectations reasonable and natural, or were they not?

The answer seems to me quite clear. They were entirely natural, but not quite reasonable. We could not help feeling them; but it was not at all likely that the average American voter should feel as we did. How should he? One need not speak of the six million Germans, and the innumerable other aliens in the United States; nor yet of the traditional anti-British feeling in the political "mob." The plain fact is that nations do not go to war for remote philanthropic objects. They get near it sometimes, as we got near it with Turkey in 1895, over the Armenian massacres. But they do not go over the edge, except where the philan-

thropic indignation is reinforced by other motives or causes of quarrel. And even there, time is needed to awake a whole nation. Mental preparation is needed; the culprit must have a bad character already; the proof of the crime committed must be exceedingly clear. None of these conditions was present in 1914. The Germans were greatly respected in the United States. There had been a powerful and assiduous court paid to American opinion. Every single crime committed by Germany was accompanied by a cloud of dust and counter-accusation. It was the Russians who insisted on war; it was France which invaded Belgium; it was the Belgian women and children who committed atrocities on the German soldiers; it was the English who used explosive bullets and poisonous gas; I forget whether it was the *Lusitania* which tried to sink the poor submarine, or if that was only the *Arabic*; but at every single point at which the national indignation of America might have exploded the issue was confused and befogged. We should remember the immortal words of the Pope, when confronted by the twentieth or thirtieth demonstration of the bestialities done by the Germans in Belgium: "*But you know, they say they didn't.*" The same answer was always open

not only to Colonel Bryan (why should that eminent pacifist be denied his full claim to military glory?), but to men of much less nebulous judgment than he.

No; it was not reasonable to expect the United States to plunge into war for motives of philanthropy. And if one begins to put the question on other grounds, then clearly it is not for us foreigners to decide what course best suits the interest or dignity of the United States. They know their own case, *pro* and *con*, far better than we can, and we certainly need not complain of either the skill or the fervour with which our friends in that great, strange country have stated our case.

But the matter is decided. America will not join in this war. Both political parties are united on that point; and only a few voices of independent thinkers, voices sometimes of great weight and eloquence, are lifted in protest. I do not, of course, say that there might not arise some new and unexpected issue which would compel her to change her policy; but, as far as the issues are now known, the Americans have made up their minds to have no war.

Such a decision has, of course, had its consequences. Any person who, after hesitating, comes to a decision, likes afterwards to have as

many grounds as possible for justifying himself, and the same holds of a nation. If America had, for good or evil, plunged into the war, she would have found easily a thousand reasons for being enthusiastic about it and for justifying her intimate sympathy with us. It is now the other way. She cannot help feeling a certain coldness towards people who, as she thinks, tempted her to dangerous courses; who certainly felt, however unreasonably, a shade of disappointment about her. What right had we to be disappointed; to hint by our manner, if not by words, that she had chosen safety rather than the *beau rôle?* After all, why should she fight England's battles? Wicked as the Germans are—and hardly any normal American defends them—is England so entirely disinterested and blameless? Is Ireland so much more contented than Alsace-Lorraine? Do the "Black List" and the Paris Resolutions and the "Orders in Council" suggest that the new Liberal England is so very different from the old England that was America's natural enemy? The President has used language which looks like a repudiation of all moral or human interest in Europe's quarrels: "With the causes and objects of the war America is not concerned." I do not believe that the

President himself really would hold to that dictum, and I am sure his countrymen would not. The principle is too cynical for either. But, as far as direct public action is concerned, that statement holds the field. Belgium, Armenia, Poland, Miss Cavell, the horrors of Wittenberg, the wholesale deportations of women, the habitual killing of unarmed civilians; all these are to count as matters of indifference for the executive government of the United States.

But not for the human beings who compose the United States, whether in the Government or out of it. The more they have decided not to intervene publicly in the war, the more they are ready to pour out their sympathy, their work, and their riches to help the distresses of the war. Never was there a nation so generous, so ready in sympathy, so quick to respond to the call of suffering. They exceed England in these qualities almost as much as England exceeds the average of Europe. They will stand aloof from the savage old struggle, free, unpolluted, rejoicing in their own peace and exceeding prosperity, but always ready to send their missionaries and almoners to bind the wounds of more benighted lands. The wars of Europe are not their business.

Unless, indeed, after the war, the victor should come out too powerful? A victorious Germany is fortunately out of the question; but a victorious England—might not that bring trouble? America must after all be "prepared."

II.

It is hard for an Englishman to understand how a very great nation, a very proud nation, whom we, accustomed to range the whole circuit of the world and find our brothers trading or governing in the antipodes, look upon instinctively as our own kinsmen and natural friends, should be content to stay apart from the great movement of the world, and to strike no blow either for Democracy or Absolutism; to leave it to others to decide whether peace or war shall be the main regulator of national life, whether treaties shall be sacred or not, whether or not "Government of the people by the people for the people" shall perish from the greater part of the earth. And many Americans feel as we do. The most brilliant and magnetic of America's recent Presidents feels as we do. But, as a rule, I believe, the average

American is not only content, but proud to stand thus aloof and indifferent. The line of thought leading to such a pride is one familiar to many generations of Americans, the glory of their immense isolation.

Why should they turn back to mix again in the misery and blood-guiltiness of that evil old world from which their fathers and mothers fled ? They will forgive it, now that they are free and safe. They will forgive it; they will revisit it sometimes with a kind of affection; they will pour out their abundant riches to alleviate its sufferings, but they will never again be entangled in its schemes and policies, they will never again give it power over them.

Generation after generation of American settlers have been refugees from European persecution. Refugee Puritans, refugee Quakers, refugee Catholics, French Huguenots, English and German Republicans, in later days persecuted Jews and Poles and Russian revolutionaries have all found shelter and freedom in America, and most of them some degree of prosperity and public respect. And far more numerous than these definite sufferers from religious or political persecution have been the swarms of settlers who, for one reason or another, had found life too hard in the Old World. In

every generation the effect is repeated. Europe is the place that people fly from; the place of tyrants and aristocracies, of wars and crooked diplomacy, the place where the poor are so miserable that they leave their homes and families and spend their last shilling in order to work at the lowest manual labour in the one land on earth which will really assure them "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." No wonder it is easy for an American to reject all responsibility for the troubles of Europe!

Nay, when you meet an American who is really interested in Europe, you will be surprised to find how little he cares for the things that we consider liberal or progressive. Such things are not what he wants of Europe. He can get them at home. He likes Europe to be European. What he asks of Europe is picturesqueness; old castles, and Louis XIV., and Austrian rules of etiquette and an unreformed House of Lords. When we reform such things away he is rather regretful, as we in England might be at the Chinese cutting off their pigtails. In his leisure hours he likes us as we are, and when it comes to business his only determination is that we shall never again interfere with him.

I do not say that such an attitude is wise or right; much less that it is universal in America.

But it is a state of mind which is easily intelligible and which must always be reckoned with.

A Liberal Englishman will quite understand it. He may, perhaps, regard it with a good deal of sympathy, and even imagine that it must lead, on the whole, to a feeling of friendliness towards England as contrasted with the less liberal Powers. But it is not so. Every large wave of feeling demands a human representative or symbol, and the course of history has decreed that to the average American the symbol of European tyranny is England. He knows, of course, that the government of Russia or Prussia or Austria or divers other nations may be much worse than that of England; but his own historical quarrel, repeated through many generations, has been with England, and the typical fight for human freedom against tyranny is the American War of Independence; next to that comes the War of 1812. The cause is now won. Freedom is safe, and his relations with England are peaceful, and even friendly. Yet the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. When he hears the words Orders in Council, Restriction of Trade, Right of Search, Black List, something argumentative and anxious rises within him. When he hears that some person has been condemned as a rebel against the

British Government, he tends to murmur, "So was George Washington!"

No; he bears no grudge against his old enemy, but England belongs to Europe, not to America; and she can stay where she belongs. For his part, what does he want with other nations?

He is a citizen of the greatest free nation in the world, and not only the greatest but, by every sane standard that he believes in, infinitely the best. It has a larger white population than the whole British Empire. Its men and women are more prosperous, cleaner, better paid, better fed, better dressed, better educated, better in physique than any others on the face of the globe. They have simpler and saner ideals, more kindliness and common-sense, more enterprise, and more humanity. Silly people in Europe, blind, like their ancestors, imagine that America somehow lacks culture, and must look abroad for its art and learning; why, as a matter of fact, the greatest sculptor since Michael Angelo was an American, St. Gaudens; the two best painters of the last decades, Abbey and Sargent, were both Americans; up to last year the most famous English novelist was an American; the best public architecture is notoriously to be found in America, as well as the

best public concerts and libraries, and the most important foundations for scientific research. And to crown our friend's confident picture, there is no country on earth where the children are so happy.

A friend of mine stayed last year in a summer camp of young men and women in a forest in the Middle-West, and never once heard the European war mentioned. One night, as they looked over a moon-lit lake, a young student spoke thoughtfully of the peacefulness of the scene, and the contrast it made with the terrible sufferings of mankind elsewhere. My friend agreed, and murmured something about the sufferings of Europe. "Lord, I wasn't thinking of Europe," said the young man; "I was thinking of the thunder-storms in Dakota."

If only they could really remain aloof! But they cannot. There is, at least, one Power with whom they are constantly in contact, and whose world-wide interests are constantly rubbing against theirs both by land and sea; and that Power is Great Britain.

"When two empires find their interests continually rubbing against each other in different parts of the world," said Sir Edward Grey in 1911, "there is no half-way house possible between constant liability to friction and

cordial friendship." That is the gentle and statesmanlike way of putting it. An eloquent American, whose speech this year has been circulated widely across the continent, phrased the matter more strongly. He advocated definitely a British Alliance on the ground that, between two nations so intimately connected and touching each other at so many points, there is no third way: it must be either Alliance or War. Yet Alliance, after what we have seen, seems impossible; and War cannot even for an instant be thought of. It would be the last disgrace to the modern world, the final downfall of civilisation.

Let us try to consider what forces are working in either direction.

III.

"EITHER Alliance or War!" It sounds at first hearing a fantastic exaggeration. Yet the words have been spoken by sober-minded people, and it is worth while trying to think them out. It is easy for an Englishman to find in America confirmation of whatever opinions he happens to hold, and terribly easy for him to get the pro-

portional importance of such opinions completely wrong. Indignation with Germany and horror at her cruelties; emotion about the Irish rebellion and its suppression; irritation at the Black List; angry alarm at the Paris Resolutions; a general desire for kindness to everybody, and especially for a quick and generous peace—all these waves of sentiment, and many others, are to be found in America, and possess their own importance and influence. But it seems to me that there are two currents of feeling that have swept the whole continent, and are likely, whatever party is in power, to shape the effective policy of the United States.

The first, reaction produced by the war and the determination not to participate in it has been the movement for "Preparedness." It is first a preparedness for war. England, according to popular opinion, had been unprepared, and France not much better. America, had she tried to enter the war, would have been more utterly unprepared than either. Suppose the German attack had fallen on her?

The direction of this first movement has gradually changed with the course of events. The campaign of "Preparedness" presupposes some possible or probable aggressor, and it has gradually become clear that that aggressor will

not, for many years to come, be Germany. The prospect of a really victorious Germany would shake America to her foundations and probably change completely the national policy; but there is now no such prospect. The danger, if there is any, will come from a victorious Great Britain, allied, as America always remembers, with a victorious and unexhausted Japan. Other neutral nations in this war may be waiting to side with the conqueror; but America is built on too large a scale for that. She will arm against the conqueror, and be prodigal of help to the vanquished.

The Preparedness campaign is still in its early stages and has not assumed its definite form. But it started as a spontaneous non-party movement; it was taken up by the Republican opposition; it was eagerly supported by President Wilson and his Government; it has been clearly thought out and firmly developed by Mr. Hughes. Army, Navy, and mercantile marine are all to be increased and developed; but it is noteworthy that more stress is laid on the Navy than on the Army, and politicians have already uttered the ominous phrase, "a fleet that shall not be at the mercy of the British fleet!" More important still must be the preparation for a great mercantile rivalry.

Vast sums have already been appropriated for shipbuilding, and other steps, too, are to be taken to secure for America her proper position in shipping and in foreign trade. No more dependence upon English bottoms! Competition will be very severe. At the end of the war, Mr. Hughes warned the audience in his Notification Speech, "the energies of each of the new belligerent nations, highly trained, will be turned to production. These are days of terrible discipline for the nations at war. . . . Each is developing a national solidarity, a knowledge of method, a realisation of capacity hitherto unapproached." Mr. Hughes is too wise and broad-minded to put his thought in a threatening shape. But most of his hearers throughout that vast hall thought of the Resolutions of Paris, and felt that if the Allies chose to pursue war-methods in their commercial action America must be ready to respond.

One's heart sinks at the prospect opened out by this policy. Trade rivalry; severe protection; the State deliberately entering into the commercial contest with subsidies and penalties; competitive shipbuilding; the desire for a strong Navy behind the merchant fleet; and at the end of a vista that prize which has dazzled so many nations, some of them perhaps not much

less peace-loving and level-headed than the United States, the position of recognised centrality and supremacy among the great nations of the world.

Is there no prospect of escape ?

Yes, there is. The above is the first great current of feeling that, in my judgment, has swept the whole people of the United States ; the second is the antidote to it, and is almost, if not quite, equally strong. It is the determination that, if America can help it, a colossal iniquity like the present war shall not be allowed to occur again. The feeling needs no explanation. It is that of every Englishman of moderately liberal feelings, and is deeply ingrained in the nature of the ordinary American. It has swept through all political parties and most other sections of the community, except a few extreme pacifists and those pro-Germans who are working for an inconclusive peace and a second war.

It was first formulated by Mr. Taft, as president of the League to Enforce Peace. Mr. Taft's series of arbitration treaties, following on those initiated by John Hay, made him the natural champion of this further effort to organise the prevention of future wars. The general idea is quite simple and well known : a League of Powers, bound to settle their differ-

ences by conference or arbitration, and equally bound to make joint war on any Power which, in a dispute with one of them, refuses arbitration and insists on war.

The plan was immediately welcomed by public opinion in the States. It spread everywhere. President Wilson committed himself to it last May in an emphatic speech, which was perhaps a little too tenderly tactful towards the Germans to be wholeheartedly acceptable in England. But in point of fact most of the leaders of English thought had already expressed approval of the principle. It is no less significant that the federated Chamber of Commerce of the United States, a powerful and extremely cautious body, has voted by large majorities in favour of the policy of the League, and by overwhelming majorities for all the proposals but one. (Just over a third of the delegates shrank from committing themselves to actual war for the sake of peace, though they were ready to agree to an absolute boycott of the peace-breaker.) And, finally, Mr. Hughes, in his Notification Address, has thrown the whole strength of the Republican Party into the scheme. His words are well thought out:

"We are deeply interested in what I may term the organisation of peace. We cherish no

illusions. We know that the recurrence of war is not to be prevented by pious wishes. If the conflict of national interests is not to be brought to the final test of force there must be a development of international organisation in order to provide international justice and to safeguard as far as practicable the peace of the world." In addition to the International Tribunal and the sanction of armed force behind it, " there are also legislative needs. We need conferences of the nations to formulate international rules, to establish principles, to modify and extend international law so as to adapt it to new conditions and remove causes of international difference."

This is obviously no fantastic scheme. It is accepted by the leaders of both parties, and by the enormous preponderance of American opinion, both progressive and conservative, both educated and uneducated. It is only rejected by the open enemies of England and by some of the extreme pacifists.

It is hard at present for the leaders of a belligerent nation to come prominently forward in favour of such a scheme as this. For one thing they cannot act without their Allies; for another, they must not lay themselves open to the charge that they are spending their time

and thought on any object but the winning of the war. Still, there is little doubt about the general attitude of the leaders of public opinion in England towards a scheme of this kind. Mr. Asquith, Mr. Balfour, and Viscount Grey, among others, have spoken pretty clearly.

"Long before this war," said the last named, on May 15, 1916, "I hoped for a league of nations that would be united, quick, and instant to prevent, and, if need be, to punish the violation of international treaties, of public right, of national independence, and would say to nations that came forward with grievances and claims: 'Put them before an impartial tribunal. If you can win at this bar you will get what you want. If you cannot you shall not have what you want. And if instead you attempt to start a war, we shall adjudge you the common enemy of humanity and treat you accordingly.' Unless mankind learns from this war to avoid war the struggle will have been in vain."

Almost all opinion in England agrees; so, as far as my information goes, does opinion in France. But in America the course of events has brought the movement more sharply to the front and faced it with a far more emphatic alternative. If we and our Allies respond to this movement there is good hope for the world;

the enemy may respond or not, as he prefers. If we reject it there is before us not merely the possibility of some unknown future war, such as there was before the present shaping of the nations; there is a peril clearer and more precise. There are definite seeds of international rivalry already sown and growing; there are on both sides of the Atlantic the deliberate beginnings of a movement which, however justifiable at present, needs but a little development to become dangerous; there is the certain prospect of those thousand disputes which are bound to arise between two great commercial nations competing hard for the same markets.

American preparedness will soon be an accomplished fact; American readiness for a League to Enforce Peace after the war is probably a fact already. We must not, of course, be precipitate; we must not forget that our actual Allies have obviously the first claim on us. We must not make any claim as of right on American sympathy, or ask her for a jot more than she is prepared to offer. But in the end it will rest largely, though not entirely, with us in Great Britain to decide whether that preparedness shall be merely an instrument for the promotion of American interests against those of her rivals,

or a great force to work in conjunction with us and our friends for organising the peace of the world. On those lines Alliance will be possible after all.

Printed in Great Britain by W. Speaight & Sons, London.